

PLAN & GO

Hiking

Plan & Go | The John Muir Trail

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All you need to know to complete one of the world's greatest trails

Gerret Kalkoffen

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sandiburg press

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Content

0. Preface	iii
1. Introduction	1
2. Requirements and Time	5
3. Long Lead Items	9
a. Permits	9
b. Hiking Buddy	15
c. Travel Arrangements.....	17
4. What to Expect	20
a. Weather & Conditions	20
b. Trails.....	24
c. Campsites	25
d. Water	27
5. Preparation & Planning	29
a. Your Itinerary	29
b. Athletic Training.....	33
c. Food.....	38
d. Resupply.....	42
6. Gear	49
a. Clothing	49
b. Hiking	51
c. Sleeping	58
d. Food & Drinks.....	65
e. Medical & Personal Care.....	79
f. Miscellaneous	81
g. Pack & Adjust your Pack.....	83

7. Personal JMT Experience..... 86

- a. Plan..... 86
- b. Go..... 99

Appendices 114

- A. Checklists 114
- B. Timeline 118
- C. Map & Elevation Profiles 119
- D. Side Trips 132
- E. Internal References..... 134
- F. Literature & Links 137
- G. List of Abbreviations..... 139

About the Author 140

Special Thanks..... 141

Disclaimer 142

0. Preface

This book is meant to give you all the information you need to prepare for and successfully complete the John Muir Trail (JMT). I am convinced you will be well prepared and save a lot of time on planning if you read the following chapters.

The book's title is a reference to my approach to anything. I find it best to put generous thought into how I want to do something, plan, organize, and then get moving. I try to convey the most important hiking information in a short but comprehensive manner. If you are looking for elaborate stories on the JMT, its history, and details on flora and fauna, this is not the book for you. However, if you are toying with the idea of hiking the JMT or have already accepted the challenge and wonder how to prepare for it, then I hope this helps – both for inexperienced hikers as well as experts.

The setting of the JMT in the California High Sierra Mountains is breathtaking. Each day, you will experience new landscapes: lush meadows with grazing deer, clear streams sparkling amidst dark pine forests, or nothing but sun-burnt rocks and boulders. Throughout a long summer stretch, weather conditions will be very pleasant. It is absolutely worth taking a few weeks to experience the solitude and nature's beauty along the trail. I promise completing the JMT will be one of the greatest and most memorable experiences of your life.

1. Introduction

After months of witnessing me prepare – making travel arrangements, researching gear, reading forums, and working out – my wife said I should write a book. I snickered but kept that thought in the back of my mind while on the trail, noting each evening in my tent what worked well and what could have gone better. In conversations with fellow JMT hikers I realized that many experiences were shared and, especially, that many similar mistakes were reoccurring. With my aversion to repeating each other's mistakes, I decided that this repetition was unnecessary and my wife was – of course – right: passing on the experiences of how to prepare and what worked on the JMT would be of value to most anyone attempting this hike.

That's the story of how this book came to life. Now, here is the story of what it is about. The JMT is a 211mi/340km trail from Yosemite Valley to the highest point of the continental US, Mt. Whitney. From the top of Mt. Whitney, it is another 11mi/18km to the nearest trailhead at Whitney Portal.

The trail was named after John Muir, a Scottish conservationist and first president of the Sierra Club, a driving force behind this trail and other preservations¹. In total, the JMT runs through five of the US' most picturesque national parks and offers spectacular sceneries of canyons, cliffs, forests, lakes, rivers, peaks and passes of over 14,000ft. It is one of the most renowned and widely recognized as one of the greatest trails in the world.

¹ www.sierraclub.org

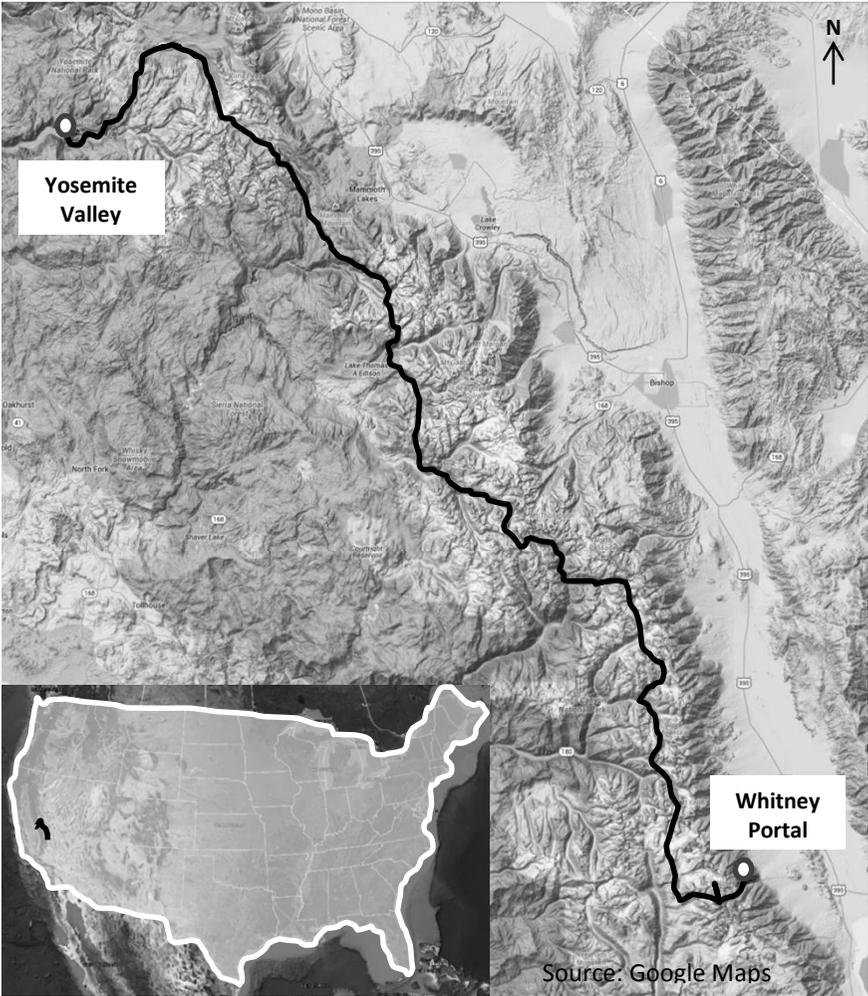


Figure 1 Overview of the John Muir Trail

Finally, here is how I came to hike the JMT. I had just moved to San Diego, California, with a vague idea of wanting to switch careers (i.e., I was not working and had time to spare). One of my best friends, Josh, was on a one-year sabbatical and looking for an adventure, despite having just walked 450mi/720km along the ancient pilgrimage route Camino de Santiago. He called me one day and asked if I had heard of the JMT. I said no, but looked into it and was stunned. Though I love hiking, I had never camped for more than 3 days in a row. I had consequently never dealt with planning large quantities of light weight food, fitting that food into a bear canister, and

how to resupply myself via mail. I was also not familiar with the specifics of the High Sierra, how to treat water, how much of it to carry, and which gear and clothing were appropriate for the conditions. However, my initial concerns were put on hold when I saw pictures of the trail.

After a quick chat with Josh, we decided to go for it. I bought a book, read lots of blogs, several online forums, and the National Parks' websites. I soon learned that getting a wilderness permit would be the bottle neck, but we got lucky. As I continued my research, I grew more confident. I was gathering lots of answers to my early questions and reading up on trail descriptions. I found that the JMT would be the perfect amount of adventure: it is in remote wilderness areas, but is decently frequented by hikers, has occasional ranger stations and sporadic ins/outs to nearby towns. The more sources I combined, the better my picture of the JMT was and the more capable I felt of the challenge.

Essentially, that is why I wrote this book. I want you to have a clear picture of what to expect on the JMT and how best to prepare yourself. Chapter 2 describes the physical challenges of the trail and gives guidance on estimating the time it will take to complete it. This initial estimate of your trail hiking days allows you to prepare the Long Lead Items of Chapter 3, such as permits and travel plans. Chapter 4 lets you know what to expect regarding weather and trail conditions, campsites, and water. How to prepare for all this physically and logistically is the topic of Chapter 5. Then, Chapter 6 takes a close look at gear options for this High Sierra setting and their correct use. Finally, Chapter 7 offers some personal experiences and anecdotes from Josh's and my adventure. Additionally, the Appendices provide checklists, elevation profiles, side trip suggestions and more, to round-off your picture of and preparation for the hike.

I hope you will find all the information you need herein and feel confident to hike the JMT.

Happy Trails!

2. Requirements and Time

Can you hike the JMT? If you are interested in hiking and have some experience, the answer is probably yes. However, 222mi/360km with 47,800ft/14,600m gain and 43,200ft/13,200m loss reaching its highest point at 14,500ft/4.420m Mt. Whitney is a challenge for anyone².

General requirements on the trail are surefootedness, ability to deal with high altitudes, and a good overall level of fitness and endurance. However, since the JMT is maintained to be passed by horses, this is a non-technical trail, i.e. no climbing skills are needed. Nevertheless, in the winter months / when snow is present, special gear and skills are necessary for safe travels.

Further requirements for the logistics are a strong back and knees to carry the load of your backpack (approx. 30-45lb/14-20kg), resistance to dry air and both hot and cold temperatures, and the ability to camp (using a gas stove, setting up your tent and pad, following nature's call in the wild, etc.).

In order to have an adequate challenge, start by planning your days on the trail. As a first guideline, use Figure 2 - based on your age and fitness level. The chart is meant to help you with an initial assessment of how many days you will take for the JMT. This is the first step to all your further planning, especially regarding food and resupply. *To read more, click [here](#) or visit www.planandgohiking.com*

Take the row with your age on the left and move right to the column corresponding to your level of fitness. For example, "John", a 40 year old of average fitness should plan to take roughly 16-18 days, so let us say 17.

² All distances and elevation gains/losses are from Yosemite Valley Happy Isles to Whitney Portal.

Age	70	18	21	23			
	60	16	18	21		<i>Not Advised</i>	
	50	14	16	18	21		
	40	12	14	16	18	21	
	30	11	13	15	17	19	21
	20	10	12	14	16	18	20
		Very Fit		Average		Less Fit	
		Level of Fitness					

Figure 2 Estimate of Trail Days on the JMT

With your estimate of trail days (ETD), you can calculate your average miles per day: divide 222 miles by your ETD.

$$\text{Average miles per day} = 222 \text{ miles} / \text{ETD}$$

Taking the above example of John leads to $222/17= 13$ miles per day on average. That might not sound like much, but keep in mind that every horizontal mile is accompanied by 230ft up and 210ft down, i.e., equivalent to approx. 500 stair steps up and 450 steps down.

While on the JMT, I met a 74 year old who was planning 24 days with his wife; a 67 year old who was doing the JMT in 32 day (for the 8th time!); a 63 year old who finished in 16 days; and a 50 year old who completed the JMT in 15 days. On average, most people will spend 15-20 days between Yosemite and Whitney Portal. Schedules vary greatly on how each one allocates time on and off the trail, hiking and relaxing.

In order to account for these differences and to give you a more personalized trail itinerary, consider the following questions: *To read more, click [here](#)*

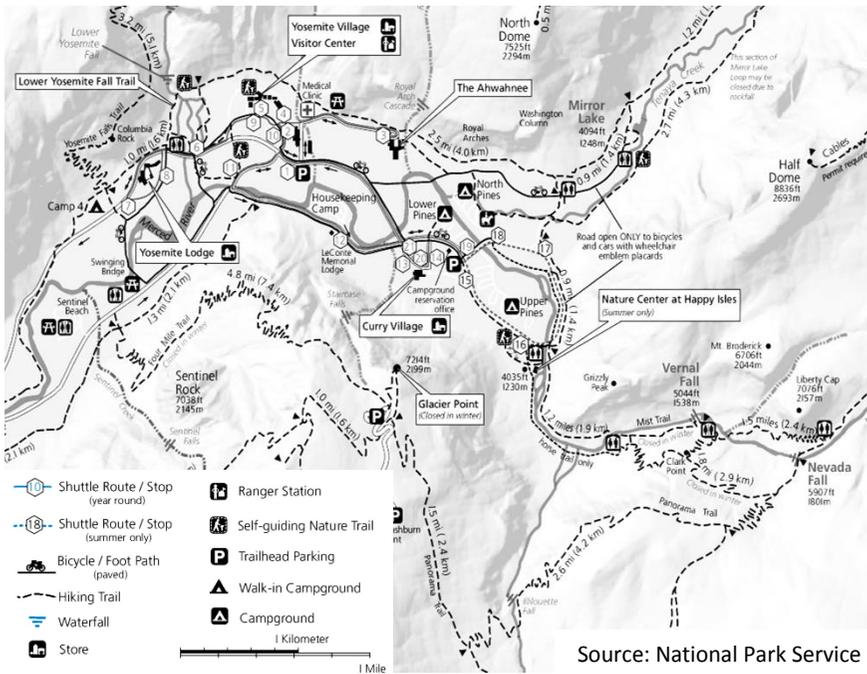


Figure 3 Yosemite Valley Map

b. Hiking Buddy

Finding the right hiking buddy for this challenging endeavor can be a challenge in itself. Depending on who your friends are, this part may be complicated or not. Either way, your prospective hiking buddy³ will need sufficient time to prepare, so you need to think about who you want to give a heads up. But before you start asking everyone you know, you may want to consider this:

- You will be spending 2+ weeks with this person, day and night
- You should have somewhat similar hiking speeds
- Your buddy should be likely to keep his commitment

To read more, click [here](#)

³ For simplicity, I am using the male, singular form “hiking buddy”, which shall also include all female and multiple “buddies” if applicable.

Of most things, however, each of you will need or want your own (see Chapter 6 *Gear*). Though sharing a tent would also save some weight, it does not outweigh the comfort of being able to retreat alone after a long day.

Especially if this is your first multi-day hike, a friend by your side can keep spirits up and make recovering easier. You can help keep each other on schedule, discuss how far to walk, where to set up camp, where to rest, remind each other to put on sun screen, etc. In case of an emergency, it is obviously good to have someone close. Though the JMT is quite frequented in the summer time, you never know when another hiker will pass.

For several other reasons, it is wonderful to bring a companion... *To read more, click [here](#)*

c. Travel Arrangements

Getting to and from the main trailheads at Yosemite Valley and Whitney Portal takes some planning, but is still rather convenient when you consider that you are entering a wilderness zone. Depending on where you are coming from and which direction you want to walk the JMT, choose a combination of the below means of transportation and make sure to check the schedules [Travel Arrangements].

The following map shows all the possible travel options. Further below, you will find the specifics of each of these options explained in more detail...

To read more, click [here](#)

Travelling by rental car

Renting a car can save you a lot of time if public transport connections are unfortunate for your location and/or date of travel. The closest rental car centers to the trail heads are... *To read more, click [here](#)*

Travelling by airplane

Most out-of-state hikers will fly into San Francisco or Los Angeles. Any combination of the above buses, trains, and rental cars is then easily available. Additionally, there are regular scheduled flights between...

To read more, click [here](#)

Travelling with your own car

There is long-term parking at both trailheads, so you can choose to leave your car at your start or finishing point. After strenuous weeks of hiking, being able to get in your car and take off without having to worry about bus connections can be worth getting the logistics over with before starting your trek. Remember not to leave any food or scented items in your car. Having a cell phone charger that plugs into your lighter outlet may come in handy.

4. What to Expect

This Chapter is intended to give you an impression of the conditions on the JMT. This can serve as a guide to choosing your gear and making your preparations. Later, you can compare your thoughts with a gear overview in Chapter 6 *Gear* and my personal experiences in Chapter 7 *Plan and Go*.

a. Weather & Conditions

Temperature

The most important measure in deciding what kind of clothing to bring is the expected temperature. In order to estimate temperatures along the trail, it is useful to use a lapse rate. As a rule of thumb, deduct... *To read more, click [here](#)*

Remember that you will be at altitudes well above 9,000ft for a great portion of the trail. This means that while temperatures may be fairly low during the day, due to low humidity and aerosols, the sun will be merciless. At the same time, this source of warmth will set early behind other peaks and temperatures will drop quickly. Additionally, any water you find for washing clothes and yourself will likely be around 40-60°F / 4-15°C. Keep this in mind when planning your arrivals to camp. At the end of a long day, your energy and body heat fade. And while you will want to wash off dust and sweat, regaining a comfortable temperature becomes a challenge after sunset. This means, the earlier you can set out in the morning, the more distance you can cover before the sun is too hot, but also arrive at camp and get washed up while the sun is still out and strong enough to dry/warm you.

Precipitation

From June to September, when most hikers hit the trail, it will only rain occasionally – if at all. However, there is a fair chance that it will rain at least once while you are hiking, especially in June (see Table 1).

Table 2 reads as follows: Taking the row of July: July has an average precipitation of 0.3in./1cm, historically wet Julys reached up to 4.2in./11cm; there is usually one day of rainfall of greater than 0.01in./0.3cm and one with more than 0.1in./3mm; there are zero days with any stronger precipitation let alone snowfall. So in a nutshell... *To read more, click [here](#)*

Other Conditions

Wild fires are unpredictable but common occurrences in California. Most recently in 2013, forest fires devastated large areas in the Yosemite Wilderness as well as around Mammoth. The fires never got close enough to the JMT to pose an immediate threat to hikers, but the partially thick smoke put stress on breathing and reduced visibility.

While you cannot prepare in advance for a wild fire, you can take the right precautions if you are aware of wild fires in the area... *To read more, click [here](#)*

b. Trails

The JMT is wonderful. It is mostly a somewhat narrow, single lane trail that feels like a minimal disruption to the surrounding wilderness. As the trail is frequented (scarcely) by horses and mules, there is never a need for climbing (involving your hands). However, there are very steep, winding passages with sudden drop-offs to the sides, where you wonder how these large animals do it. The drop-offs and ledges also call for you to be fairly resistant to heights.

The predominant surfaces you walk on are... *To read more, click [here](#)*

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